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Reckless Abandonment

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By Douglas Brinkley
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Over the past two years since Hurricane Katrina, I've seen waves of hardworking volunteers from nonprofits, faith-based groups and college campuses descend on [New Orleans](#), full of compassion and hope.

They arrive in the city's Ninth Ward to painstakingly gut houses one by one. Their jaws drop as they wander around afflicted zones, gazing at the towering mounds of debris and uprooted infrastructure.

After weeks of grueling labor, they realize that they are running in place, toiling in a surreal vacuum.

Two full years after the hurricane, the Big Easy is barely limping along, unable to make truly meaningful reconstruction progress. The most important issues concerning the city's long-term survival are still up in the air. Why is no Herculean clean-up effort underway? Why hasn't [President Bush](#) named a high-profile czar such as [Colin Powell](#) or [James Baker](#) to oversee the ongoing disaster? Where is the U.S. government's participation in the rebuilding?

And why are volunteers practically the only ones working to reconstruct homes in communities that may never again have sewage service, garbage collection or electricity?

Eventually, the volunteers' altruism turns to bewilderment and finally to outrage. They've been hoodwinked. The stalled recovery can't be blamed on bureaucratic inertia or red tape alone. Many volunteers come to understand what I've concluded is the heartless reality: The Bush administration actually wants these neighborhoods below sea level to die on the vine.

These days a stiff [Caribbean](#) breeze causes residents to jerk into a high-alert state of anxiety. Still unfinished is the overhaul of what some call the "Lego levees," the notoriously flawed 350-mile "flood protection system" that the [U.S. Army Corps of Engineers](#) starting building in 1965.

The Corps has been busy fixing the three principal holes that opened in August 2005. Its hard work has, in fact, paid a partial dividend. A decent defensive floodwall is now on the east side of the Industrial Canal, attempting to protect the [Lower Ninth Ward](#).

Unfortunately, that is where the upbeat news nosedives. The federal government has refused to shut the [Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet](#) canal that helped cause the Katrina "funnel effect" flooding two years ago. In addition, entire neglected neighborhoods still have no adequate flood control.

The answer to New Orleans's levee woes is painfully obvious: money and willpower. Common sense dictates that the endangered areas -- if repopulated (and that is a big if) -- demand levees that can sustain Category 5 storms. It's a national obligation. Entire blocks are moldering away while the federal government lifts only a cursory hand to reverse the desultory trend.

Unfortunately, one of the biggest misperceptions the American public harbors is that Katrina was a week-long catastrophe. In truth, it's better to view it as an era. Remember, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s lasted eight or nine years. We're still in the middle of the Katrina saga.

Bold action has been needed for two years now, yet all that the [White House](#) has offered is an inadequate trickle of billion-dollar Band-aids and placebo directives. Too often in the United States we forget that "inaction" can be a policy initiative. Every day the White House must decide what not to do.

The stubborn inaction appears to fall under the paternalistic guise of helping the storm victims. Bush's general attitude -- a Catch-22 recipe if ever there was one -- appears to be that only rank fools would return when the first line of hurricane defense are the levees that this administration so far refuses to fix.

New Orleans appears to be largely abandoned by the [Department of Homeland Security](#), except for its safeguarding of the Port Authority (port traffic is at 90 percent of pre-Katrina numbers) and tourist districts above sea level, such as the [French Quarter](#) and Uptown. These areas are kept alive largely by the wild success of [Harrah's](#) casino and a steady flow of undaunted conventioners.

The brutal [Galveston](#) Hurricane of 1900 may be a historical guide to the administration's thinking. Most survivors of that deadly [Texas](#) storm moved to higher land. Administration policies seem to tacitly encourage those who live below sea level in New Orleans to relocate permanently, to leave the dangerous water's edge for more prosperous inland cities such as [Shreveport](#) or [Baton Rouge](#).

After the 1900 hurricane, in fact, Galveston, which had been a large, thriving port, was essentially abandoned for [Houston](#), transforming that then-sleepy backwater into the financial center for the entire Gulf South. Galveston devolved into a smallish port-tourist center, one easy to evacuate when hurricanes rear their ugly heads.

To be fair, Bush's apparent post-Katrina inaction policy makes some cold, pragmatic sense. If the U.S. government is not going to rebuild the levees to survive a Category 5 storm -- to be finished at the earliest in 2015 and at an estimated cost of \$40 billion, far eclipsing the extravagant bill for the entire Interstate Highway System -- then options are limited.

But what makes the current inaction plan so infuriating is that it's deceptive, offering up this open-armed spin to storm victims: "Come back to New Orleans." Why can't Bush look his fellow citizens in the eye and tell them what seems to be the ugly truth? That as long as he's commander in chief, there won't be an entirely reconstructed levee system.

Shortly after Katrina hit, former House speaker J. [Dennis Hastert](#) declared that a lot of New Orleans could be "bulldozed." He was shot down by an outraged public and media, which deemed such remarks insensitive and callous. Two years have shown that Hastert may have articulated what appears to have become the White House's de facto policy. He may have retreated, but the inaction remains.

The White House keeps spinning Bush's abysmal poll numbers by claiming that his legacy will rise decades from now the way [Harry S. Truman](#)'s did. But Truman had a reputation for straight talk and bold vision. If Bush wants history to perceive him as Trumanesque, then he must act Trumanesque.

Bush's predecessors moved mountains. [Theodore Roosevelt](#) set aside 230 million acres for wildlife conservation (plus built the Panama Canal). [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) began a kaleidoscope of New Deal programs to calm the Great Depression and Truman oversaw the Marshall Plan rebuilding of [Western Europe](#) after World War II. Bush could seize the initiative and announce a real plan to rebuild, a partnership between the government, Fortune 500 companies and faith-based groups.

Unfortunately, right now New Orleans is having a hard time lobbying on its own behalf. [Minnesota](#)'s Twin Cities have about 20 Fortune 500 companies to draw in private-sector money to help rebuild the bridge that collapsed in [Minneapolis](#). New Orleans has one, [Entergy](#), which is verging on bankruptcy. So besides U.S. taxpayers and port fees, New Orleans must count on spiked-up tourist dollars to jumpstart the post-Katrina rebuild.

But this is where the bizarre paradox of living in a city of ruins comes into play. Out of one side of its mouth the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce says, "Come on down, folks! We're not underwater!" Yet these same civic boosters -- viscerally aware that the Bush administration is treating the desperate plight of New Orleans in an out-of-sight, out-of-mind fashion -- don't want to bite the hand that feeds them large chunks of reconstruction cash. New Orleans is both bragging about normalcy and

poor-mouthing itself, confusing Americans about what the real state of the city is.

Recently Mayor C. [Ray Nagin](#), born with the proverbial foot in his mouth, tried to explain why the homicide rate in New Orleans is so appallingly high. When a TV reporter asked, Nagin merely shrugged: "It's not good for us, but it also keeps the New Orleans brand out there." This absurd comment -- and dozens like it -- hurts New Orleans's recovery almost as much as Bush's policy of inaction.

Everywhere I travel in the United States, people ask, "Why did you guys reelect such a doofus?" There is a feeling that any community that reelected a "first responder" who stayed in a [Hyatt Regency](#) suite during Hurricane Katrina, never delivered a speech to the homeless at the Superdome or Convention Center in New Orleans, and played the "chocolate city" race card at a historic moment when black-white healing was needed probably deserves to get stiffed by the federal government.

And Nagin isn't the only bad ambassador New Orleans has. It also has City Council member [Oliver Thomas](#), Sen. [David Vitter](#) and [Rep. William J. Jefferson](#) -- all currently in deep trouble for potentially breaking the law. Dismayed by such political buffoonery, Americans have simply turned a blind eye to New Orleans's reconstruction plight. There is a scolding sentiment around the country that [Louisiana](#) needs to get its own house in order before looking for fresh levee handouts.

Then there are egregious contractor crimes such as over-billing and price-gouging. The medical infrastructure has largely collapsed. Mercy and Charity hospitals remain closed. A severe crisis in mental health care has erupted and gang violence is on the rise. The [Environmental Protection Agency](#) refuses to clearly state that it's safe to live in the metro area. Young professionals, recognizing that there are greener pastures all over the nation, are fleeing in droves.

Even with our trillion-dollar debt and excessive military expenses in [Iraq](#), the American people, if presented with a bold plan, might be ready to save the beleaguered city. Perhaps the people haven't lost their good Samaritan grit.

Let's, for once, put New Orleans on the front burner. After all, Katrina exposed all the ills of urban America -- endemic poverty, institutionalized racism, failing public schools and much more. New Orleans is just a microcosm of [Newark](#) and [Detroit](#) and hundreds of other troubled urban locales.

How we deal with New Orleans's future will tell us a lot about our nation's future. In 2008 it should really be an up or down vote. Category 5 levees or not? An independent [FEMA](#) or a FEMA still ensconced in Homeland Security? Do we pour \$40 billion into grandiose Louisiana engineering projects or do we instead put up "no trespassing" signs in the areas below sea level? All are hard choices with various merits and pains.


The important thing, however, is for America to decide whether the current policy of inaction is really the way we want to deal with the worst natural disaster in our history.

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